



MAJOR OPERATION IN SALINAS ARRESTS 37 GANG MEMBERS

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'KNOCKOUT' GANG BUSTS YIELD 37 ARRESTS IN SALINAS AREA

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As residents of an east Salinas neighborhood were getting out of bed Thursday morning, one home on the street had a rude awakening.

In the chill air just before 7 a.m., about a half dozen Salinas anti-gang officers carrying M-16s stormed single-file into a house in the 1400 block of Gaviota Drive.

"Get down!" yelled an officer from the city's Violence Suppression Unit as the door opened.

The officers disappeared through the door. Minutes later a man and woman were escorted out. Both were in pajama bottoms; the man wore a gray hooded sweatshirt; the woman, a purple tank top.

Ten minutes later, Rigoberto Chavez Diaz followed, in handcuffs, shirtless, wearing shorts, a jacket and socks to keep warm.

Police said Diaz's presence was the reason for the raid.

Diaz, 24, was one of 37 people arrested Thursday as part of "Operation Knockout," an eight-month coordinated effort among federal, state and Monterey County law enforcement agencies to take down some of the most powerful gang leaders in the Salinas area.

Authorities said the arrestees belong to Norteño and Sureño criminal street gangs.

'TODAY, THE HAND CLOSED'

"These are higher-up people," state Attorney General Jerry Brown said. "These are some serious shot-callers who've caused a lot of devastation."

Brown spoke at a City Hall Rotunda news conference in Salinas later Thursday, flanked by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and U.S. Attorney Joseph Russoniello.

The charges the men and women face, Salinas police Chief Louis Fetherolf said, include homicide, assault and drug trafficking, among others. He declined to give specifics on the homicide cases; Salinas has seen 54 gang-related homicides in the past two years and more than 200 shootings related to gang violence.

Evidence taken included \$34,000 in cash; 40 pounds of cocaine; 14 pounds of marijuana; and 12 guns.

"Welcome to Day 1 of Judgment Day," said Fetherolf, who vowed more suppression efforts to come.

"We have held out an open hand to those who commit violence, as we've done with Operation Ceasefire," Mayor Dennis Donohue said. "Stop now, and we will help you turn your life around. But where that offer is refused, the hand closes. Today, the hand closed."

Schwarzenegger said the busts capped eight months of coordinated efforts. "We promised through our anti-gang organization CalGRIP that we will work with you," he said, referring to an anti-gang summit held in Salinas last August. "Today, you see follow-through."

Officials said the arrests disrupted a major Norteño cocaine and methamphetamine distribution group supplied by Mexican drug-trafficking organizations.

200-PLUS AGENTS

The operation, which was still ongoing Thursday evening, saw more than 200 federal, state and Monterey County law enforcement agents serve at least 40 search and arrest warrants, Salinas police Officer Lalo Villegas said. Fetherolf said federal agents flew in from as far as Washington, D.C., and Detroit, Mich. to assist the effort.

A helicopter from the Bureau of Narcotics Enforcement was seen overhead during the operation.

Most of the warrants were conducted in Salinas, Villegas said, but the operation stretched as far as San Jose. Police served 20 Salinas-area homes. The locations were: Williams, Mallory Canyon and Russell roads; Perez, Cabrillo, Rico, Lorimer, Front, Fremont and Sunrise streets; Julia, North Madeira, Fairview, Dallas and Alma avenues; Gaviota and San Blanco drives; Las Cruces Court; Romie Lane; and Caoba Way. In San Jose, police said, warrants were served at Senter Road and Whirlaway Drive. A warrant was also served on Wainwright Street in Monterey.

Villegas said the operation was initiated last fall by Salinas police, who quickly turned to the state Department of Justice for assistance.

"This is something that branched out locally and turned out to be something huge," he said.

Besides Salinas police, agencies involved included the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives; California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation; Bureau of Narcotics Enforcement; California Highway Patrol; Federal Bureau of Investigation; Drug Enforcement Administration; Monterey County's District Attorney's Office and Sheriff's Office; U.S. Attorney's Office Northern District of California; and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

RODEO GROUNDS BECAME KNOCKOUT HQ

The operation's central hub was at the Salinas Sports Complex, home to the California Rodeo at North Main Street. Large ATF and Salinas police trucks were set up in the parking lot, where hundreds of law enforcement agents and officials gathered there to stage raids and to process suspects. Also in the parking lot, a barbecue pit was set up to feed chicken and tri-tip to 250 people.

Villegas said not all the people brought to the Sports Complex were arrested due to warrants. Officers took some into custody as "fresh arrests," people they suspect were engaging in criminal behavior during a raid.

Fetherolf, who was sworn in as Salinas' police chief on April 7, 2009, said the past few months' work is just the first part of an ongoing crackdown. Longterm efforts will be necessary, he said, as criminals fill the void created by the arrests.

'GOD'S WORK'

Asked if the shooting death of 6-year-old Azahel Cruz in Salinas added any urgency to enforcement efforts, Brown said Operation Knockout benefited from information coming from gang associates after Azahel's death.

"When an innocent child is killed," the attorney general said, "that often stimulates the community to come forward and give us the information. ... When they kill innocent people, even friends of the gang members sometimes get very disgusted, and that's what happened in this case."

Besides Thursday's activity, authorities said 57 arrests were made in the past eight months as part of the operation. Asked if those had been reported before, Fetherolf said, "On a onesy-twosy basis.

"But we haven't been able to announce them," he said, "because they've been a part of this operation. It was tough to bite our tongues and not say anything, because it was all a part of this huge enterprise. This whole operation was unknown to most people in this community, including many people in the law enforcement arena who were not part of it.

"It's God's work," Fetherolf said. "We're cleaning up the community; we're making the community safe."